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Discovering the Hill-Stead, Interview: Cindy Cormier

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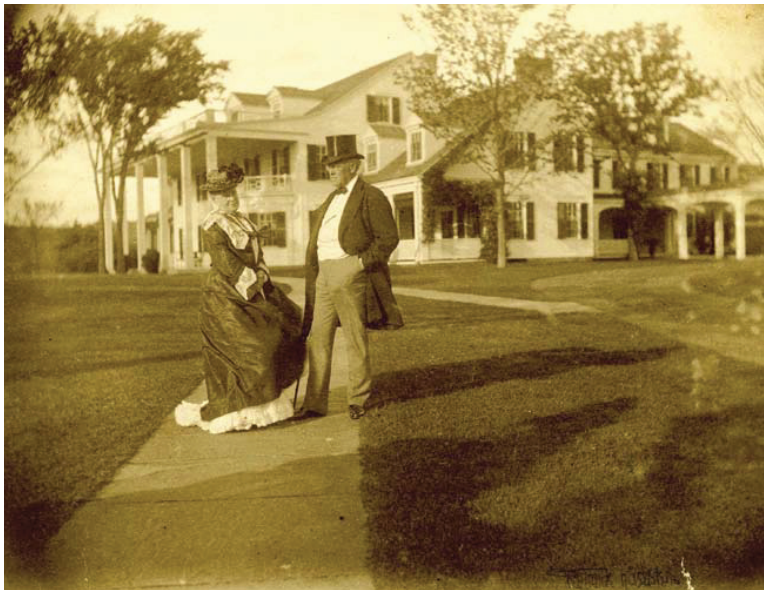

Alfred Atmore Pope and Ada Brooks Pope on West Lawn, c. 1902. Gertrude Käsebier, Photographer

DISCOVERING THE HILL-STEAD

an "Exquisite palace of peace, and light and harmony"

–Henry James, The American Scene, 1907

FOREWORD

BY ROBERT A.M. STERN

Much More Than A Comfortable Country House

Hill-Stead is much more than a comfortable country house. It is an act of personal reinvention for its principal designer, Theodate Pope, the headstrong daughter of Alfred Atmore and Ada Brooks Pope, prosperous and prominent Clevelanders whose origins only one generation before lay in hardscrabble farming in New England. Christened Effie, at an early age she renamed herself Theodate, meaning "gift of God," which was the name of her maternal grandmother from Maine. But a change of name was not enough for the imperious and ambitious Effie. Sent east to Miss Porter's School in Farmington, Connecticut, she was so inspired by the New England landscape and the local culture that by age sixteen she was drawing up plans for her dream house in Connecticut. After graduation came the customary Grand Tour of Europe with her parents and subsequent presentation to high society back in Cleveland. That was a disaster, and as soon as she was able to, Theodate engineered her escape back from Cleveland to Farmington in order to realize her architectural dream, buying and restoring in the manner of the early-nineteenth-century two Connecticut colonial farmhouses on forty-two acres of land.

But ambitious Theodate found that the renovation had not satiated her need to create. She then decided that the only way to sufficiently utilize her artistic talents, idealistic nature, and determination was to become a professional architect, despite the fact that architecture was at that time a profession virtually closed to women. Barred from admission to all-male Princeton, she enlisted private tutors. What then transpired is pretty amazing. Theodate persuaded her parents to move East, not to New York City as many rich Midwesterners like the Fricks, Carnegies, Phippses—not to mention Cleveland's leading family, the Rockefellers—were doing, but to rural Farmington. It was a brilliant strategy to launch her professional career while realizing her cultural agenda. With the promise of a commission for a big house to incorporate her parents' art collection—Impressionist paintings purchased by the Popes in Europe—Theodate, then entering her thirties, was able to enlist the renowned architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White to produce professional drawings of her ideas for a country house.

Looking back it is also amazing how similar in temperament Theodate was to another imperious self-inventor, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, with whom she shared a birth year. Wright also hated the Midwest and was able to escape it – in his case only by jettisoning wife and six children and fleeing to Italy with a lover. More importantly, he too was intent on creating the quintessential American house. Like Wright, Theodate rejected the European palace model popular in the late nineteenth century, which for her reeked of the new money and pretensions she had detested since childhood. While Wright's commanding talent propelled him toward abstraction and innovation, Theodate's more modest gifts led her toward an architecture of representation and narration. Italy or no, Wright remained a provincial—a man of the prairie which he loathed but couldn't escape. Theodate was cosmopolitan but longed to be provincial—to be rooted in her beloved corner of Connecticut. While Wright was mythologizing the prairie, but on his own artistic terms, Theodate was embracing New England vernacular, not seeking to reinvent it, but to explore its nuances.

Theodate deeply believed that historical allusion could give meaning to the present. In rewriting her past she cast her parents in the role of New England gentry, just as she had once reformulated herself from Effie to Theodate. The design for Hill-Stead did not slavishly copy its model—which interestingly joined a New England prototype with that of Mount Vernon, Virginia home to George Washington and designed by its principal resident. Repeating only the essential feature, the two-story porch, Theodate based the rest of the design on an idealized version of the New England farmhouse on a 250-acre working farm. At first glance the house may seem just another in a long series of houses modeled after the first president's—houses that include McKim, Mead and White's James Breese House (1898), Southampton, New York, which significantly began as a farmhouse, as well as Robert J. Collier's house of 1914 by John Russell Pope (no relation) at Wickatunk, New Jersey, and extending to the 1930s to reach some sort of apotheosis as home office to David O. Selznick, producer of the film Gone With the Wind (1939), and the various Howard Johnson restaurants that were built in New England in the 1930s and 1940s. But closer inspection reveals Hill-Stead's lively syncopation of façade elements, especially the colonnade played off against an antiphonal of bay windows. Inside, the Georgian regularity of Washington's house is abandoned in favor of a sophisticated spatial arrangement relating to McKim, Mead and White's Shingle Style work of the 1880s, with bold criss-crossing diagonal vistas leading the eye to the carefully placed paintings that are never permitted to be rearranged or to travel. Hill-Stead, to a remarkable degree, is both monumental and informal—no trivial accomplishment. It is a farmhouse and a mansion. Most of all, it is quintessentially an American house.

After completing Hill-Stead, Theodate went on to a career as a licensed architect, rebuilding Theodore Roosevelt's birthplace in Manhattan, designing houses and the buildings of Westover School for girls and Avon Old Farms, a school for boys which she founded and imbued with her own educational theories.

Alfred and Ada Pope finished their years at Hill-Stead and then Theodate, who married diplomat John Wallace Riddle in 1916, carried on there until her death thirty years later. The house was opened as a museum in 1947; since then, for many of its visitors, Hill-Stead has been less important as a work of architecture than as a collection of pictures. Even Philip Johnson, one of America's most important architects of the post-World War II era, failed to see its value for a very long time. Johnson, another self-inventing Clevelander, was an occasional visitor to his "Aunt Effie's" house. Philip Johnson's mother, Louise, was Theodate's first cousin. But to the young Johnson, in the 1920s and 1930s when he was a passionate Modernist singularly committed to the International Style, the house was not even to be considered as a work of architecture. Moreover, it was just "a collection of bad pictures. It was very unfashionable [then] ... to like the collection of art at Hill-Stead. Haystacks, by then... had become postcards." Today, with a more inclusive, "post-modern" approach, Hill-Stead is once again to be appreciated as architecture—indeed as among the most representative examples of the American architecture of 100 years ago.

A Little Known Treasure Hidden in Farmington, Connecticut

1) *Fishing Boats at Sea*, 1868, Claude Monet (French, 1840-1926) Oil on canvas, 37 ½ x 50 ¾ inches. **2)** *Dancers in Pink*, c. 1876, Edgar Hillaire Degas (French, 1834-1917) Oil on canvas, 23 ¼ x 29 inches. **3)** THE BLUE WAVE, Biarritz, 1862, James McNeill Whistler (American, 1834-1903) Oil on canvas, 25 ¾ x 35 inches. **4)** *The Tub*, 1886, Edgar Hillaire Degas (French, 1834-1917) Pastel on paper, 27 ½ x27 1/2 inches. **5)** *The Guitar Player*, Edouard Manet (French, 1832-1883) Oil on canvas, 25 x 31 ½ inches.

Right: Curator Cindy Cormier examines Monet's *Graintsacks* after the installation of new picture light, Fall 2009.

by Philp Eliasoph

INTERVIEW: **CINDY CORMIER**

CATCHING UP WITH HILL-STEAD'S CHIEF CURATOR, CYNTHIA CORMIER, VENÜ'S SENIOR ARTS EDITOR PHILIP ELIASOPH PROBED INTO THE ENDLESS TASKS AND DUTIES FILLING HER HECTIC DAILY SCHEDULE. SHARING HER STORY, CORMIER HIGHLIGHTS THE CHALLENGES AND PLEASURES OF CARING FOR SOME OF THE WORLD'S PREMIER IMPRESSIONIST PAINTINGS IN THE CONTEXT OF A RELAXED, COUNTRY HOME. CURATING THIS MAJOR MUSEUM COLLECTION IN AN HISTORIC RESIDENTIAL ESTATE IS HER SPECIAL TALENT.

What do you consider the most important qualifications to be a curator? What do you rely upon most in your skill set?
I think to be a curator you must have a deep understanding of the history of art, and you must always be looking at great art to develop your eye. I spend lots of my free time visiting other museums to do just that. At Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington, the art collection is largely from the 19th century but there are important objects from as far back at the 6th century B.C. If you can place the Pope family's art collection within a broader time period, you can understand it better and ultimately better share it with museum visitors. In addition, the collection at Hill-Stead was amassed by Alfred Atmore Pope, his wife Ada, and their daughter Theodate, so Hill-Stead's curator needs to wrap her mind around why and how they collected what they did and explore the ways their collecting tastes were similar to and different from others collectors in the era. Knowing about the family's interests helps me share the collection with visitors. To do this I read family letters and diary entries that discuss what they bought and why. For a broader understanding of the family I also investigate aspects of American history in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including industrialization, urbanization, education, immigration, and women's studies. A curator needs to be inquisitive and enjoy learning.

The other qualification you need as a curator is to have an appreciation for the value of original works of art. This is paramount, as I need to make sure that the collection is secure, the environment is safe, and the lighting is appropriate. You must always consider the safety of the object in its setting because ultimately your job as a curator is to ensure that nothing is damaged and that the collections remain intact for the enjoyment of future generations.

What pathway did it take for you to arrive at your position?
I've always loved art and I started my college career thinking that I might be an art major, but I quickly realized I didn't have the talent so I got a business degree instead, in health-systems management and computers. Upon graduation, I immediately got a good job. I found the project work to be gratifying but not all that intellectually stimulating. I didn't want to read about business happenings and computers in my time off. So I went back to graduate school where I learned you could study art history. Who knew there was such a thing? At UMass Amherst, all of my classmates were as interested in the history of art and in visiting museums as I was. Who knew you

Left: *Sara Handing a Toy to the Baby*, Mary Cassatt (American, 1844-1926)
Oil on canvas, 33 x 27 inches

could make a career working in museum? My kids make fun of me because I'm so interested in art; they say that as adults they plan to never visit another museum again. I only hope that one day they too find their passion.

As a graduate student I did an internship at Wadsworth Atheneum and was hired as curator of a small historic house-museum in Holyoke, Massachusetts, called Wisteriahust Museum. These were my formative experiences—one at a large art museum with a vast and important art collection, and one at a small historic house that was once home to a wealthy industrialist and his family.

Then I landed a terrific job in the education department at the Wadsworth Atheneum. As a museum educator, I developed my passion for the visitor experience and personally took thousands of people, young and old, around the museum. I spent eight years at the Wadsworth Atheneum and I've been at HSM for 12 years. HSM is an incredible historic site with buildings, grounds, architecture, and interior design filled with world-class art. We have what I think is the perfect mix of everything, and with a smaller staff—as both curator and educator—I have more diverse responsibilities and get to learn about art and so much more.

At Hill-Stead I find it interesting to think about living with great works of art as the Pope family did. In an art museum it's more about what the exhibition curator wants you to know, but at Hill-Stead it's a family story. You can imagine yourself curled up on a sofa with your favorite novel in front of a painting by Claude Monet. It's a complete immersion in the world of art—in many ways connecting to something from the past. They had their art all around them, both inside their house and outside it, in their garden, and around the estate. You can really feel it when you walk around the site. Now that I'm a homeowner, everything I've learned at Hill-Stead—be it art history, garden and landscape design, architecture, geology, botany, or natural history—all of that knowledge I take home to curate my living room or design my garden. It is really fun to take that experience home with me.

What are the most significant changes you have seen in your 12 years at Hill-Stead?
I have seen the museum become a greater force in the Greater Hartford cultural community. I'm also convinced more people know that we are here, but there are still many more people to connect with. To build our audience, we routinely partner with area arts and cultural organizations to raise the awareness of the wonderful attractions we have. We have a website, a nature blog, and monthly programs for outdoor enthusiasts that take people onto our 152-acre estate, including a popular poetry and music festival and a farmer's market. While there has always been a group of local people passionate for HS, today our base of support has grown. This is critical for us if we want to remain both financially solvent and relevant.

The museum has also seen a greater professionalism on staff—from facilities maintenance and security to collection record keeping and fundraising. We have a director of finance, institutional advancement, and communication along with a garden manager, a naturalist, and a newly hired director of marketing and brand management to help us think more broadly about who we are and how we might build our base of support and sustain our museum The museum is not only a place to see great pictures, it's a place to stroll alone or with friends, reconnect with nature, be inspired to paint or write a poem, see birds, and hear frogs. It's a great location in historic Farmington, which is a really wonderful destination in and of itself.

Lastly, the staff at HS has come of age technologically. We are inventorying the collection, computerizing our records, and digitizing images. We still have plenty on old-fashioned cards but we're looking to use computer systems to organize our collection. We hire professional staff, so it's not all volunteers, although we certainly rely quite a bit on intern and volunteer support. In the old days a retired couple ran the museum. Nowadays most directors here have advanced degrees and HS is accredited through the American Association of Museums. We have high standards and we stick to them for collections care, collections acquisition, and meeting the needs of our audience.

What are your special challenges in overseeing these interrelated parts of the puzzle?
HS has a unique set of features. First and foremost, the site is still very much as it was 110 years ago when the family first moved in. I have had the good fortune to travel a bit and I know firsthand that there are very few other sites in the world as intact and unchanged as HS. Hill-Stead was designed as a rural retreat or escape from a busy, urban lifestyle. It was an active dairy and orchard, punctuated by miles of stonewalls and ornamental gardens. It was also a comfortable home to live in and entertain guests; for some it was a place to work.

The evidence of these past functions is quite evident. Encroachment hasn't really hit this part of Farmington yet. There are no strip malls, and yet we are very close to Interstate 84 yet the setting hasn't changed very much and the collection is largely intact. It's almost an embarrassment of riches as at HS we not only have four great paintings by Claude Monet and three by Edgar Degas and James M, Whistler and two by Manet. In addition we have the family's silverware, napkins, and even their monogrammed towels. So one can get a real sense of how people lived; it's authentic.

The challenge for me is that it's hard to come to a fuller understanding of the site in a single visit, yet many people feel that one visit is all they need. The first time through you're taking it all in, and it can be overwhelming. In order to fully appreciate the experience it's worth multiple visits. Every visit will be as wonderful as the next and you'll leave with a richer sense of the place.

What can you tell us about the activities you perform that would go completely unnoticed by the casual visitor?
Even my family finds it hard to understand what we do on Mondays, when the museum is closed, or before 10 AM when the first visitors arrive for tours. I think that the public perception is that people who work at museums wait for the visitors to come down the driveway and give them a tour. While I really enjoy showing visitors around the house and grounds, there is a lot of work that goes behind the scenes, from the mundane, such as cleaning and vacuuming, to the more interesting, such as researching an object in the collection and consulting with experts.

Most recently, we decided that it was time to upgrade the light features above the paintings. The fixtures we replaced had been installed in the early 1950s when the museum first opened, and we

Left: Edgar Hillaire Degas *Jockeys* hangs perfectly over the fireplace in the Dining Room, 2005. Photo by Jerry L. Thompson.

wanted to install bright, cooler lights that illuminate the paintings better. For this project, we had to first find a good supplier for the picture lights. Then we had to put together a budget and raise the money for them. We got 15 of our best friends to donate the money to buy the fixtures and then installed them. A small project like this took months of preparations in terms of the research, fundraising, and installation, but the benefits will last for years.

We operate on a very limited budget so once you decide on a project you have to raise all the money to make it happen, and sometimes you never finish the project because the money doesn't materialize. We've been trying to raise the funds for new carpeting for several years now but sill have a long way to go.

There's cleaning that happens on Monday. People are always asking who dusts and who vacuums. All this happens on Mondays. It's also the day to upgrade the mechanical systems, such as heating and air condition and fire detection and suppression. Just like at your home, there's always something that needs fixing, painting, or oiling. There's a lot of caring for the home.

How has the museum been affected by the economic downturn?
The economic downturn has certainly been difficult for the not-for-profit cultural communities. We have always lived on a very, very tight budget and we have a small endowment. Unlike large art museums, we don't actively collect and so we don't have the expenditures of adding to our collection, nor do we host big exhibitions. It's really our public programs that keep the public coming back to HS. Take our farmers market. In hosting this, we partner with more than 15 local farmers who come here once a week and set up tables. They bring quite a few people onto our property to experience the beauty and to support HS by making people more aware of this beautiful place.

We have to continue to find a way to remain vital so people will want to visit our site and continue to support us. The farmer's market has done that, as has the annual poetry and music festival. There's a whole group of literati that come all summer long to listen to music and poetry in our Sunken Garden. In presenting the festival we partner with local and national poets, which is really a blessing. It's a great way to support and bring bigger visibility, public interest, and public support.

I am very fortunate to come to work here every day, and it is a privilege. But the responsibility of making sure we have the resources to keep this place up requires a lot support from friends and members who love you, care about your mission, and want to make a donation to help keep this going here.

Can you share some of the most rewarding experiences you've had?
First I would like to say that to be able to walk through HS all by myself as the curator, where there is no one else in the house, when the light is coming through the window illuminating Monet's *Grainstacks, White Frost Effect*, is magical. You gain an immense appreciation for the beauty of such a picture. Every time you see it it's different, every day it's different.

My real passion, however, is giving tours. Once a person steps across the threshold and into the dining room he or she is transported: The china sparkles on the table, paintings are illuminated by their gilt frames, and the scale of the rooms is both grand and intimate. For many people it stimulates memories of a fancy dinner they went to or silverware their grandmother had or the carpeting in a hotel they stayed at. People find a connection to it and often feel privileged to be in such a beautiful place. I learn quite a bit from the people I take around as they share what they've learned about different things or about their experiences. It really is a great place for exchange of ideas and knowledge.

What sorts of activities are going on this Fall?
Leaf peeping is in high gear and it's the perfect time to visit Farmington, a quintessential New England town. George Washington called Farmington the village of beautiful homes and the description remains true today. Coming up the hill from the village and down the driveway to Hill-Stead you travel down a maple-tree-lined driveway ablaze with yellows and oranges. In fact there are more maple trees on the property than any other kind of tree and it's the maple tree that gives New England its distinct fall foliage.

We have a fall Hay Day with hayrides, scarecrow making, and trail walks so you can celebrate the season. The Sunken Garden has something in bloom throughout September. HS has it all: woodlands, meadows, beautiful architecture, and gardens.

It's not just a walk in the woods, it's not just a fine arts museum—it really will appeal to more people in your family than just a hike or just an art museum.

I love hiking and I love art museums, but if you're trying to appeal to many people HS really does have it all, or more to offer than a strictly art museum.

Photo by Erin Gleason Studio, NYC

Philip Eliasoph, Ph.D. is Professor of Art History at Fairfield University. He teaches a spectrum of classes on Italian Renaissance, and American art. Among his favorite courses is the "Museum Studies" class - calling it a "museum without walls" experience, he has introduced generations of undergraduate and lifelong learning students to the special collections and paintings at Connecticut's museums and history sites. This interview derives from his "unsurpassed pleasure whenever I drive students through the stone gates of the Hill-Stead up a winding lane in Farmington – we always come away refreshed in the knowledge that Art Really Matters."